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ABSTRACT

The present article questions the assumption that the prime reason for the study of foreign languages is to develop the ability to cope with literary masterpeices in the original. A novel is written to be enjoyed; part of the enjoyment lies in the relaxation derived from undertaking a satisfying activity. It must be acknowledged, however, that many students have no literary bent, and seldom read a "classic" even in their own language except for examination purposes. Many students are not capable of successfully meeting the formidable challenge of the final examination: they have thoroughly mastered even the present-day form of the target language, let alone come to the stage of enjoying reading for its own sake. It is glibly claimed that the reading of the best examples of the literature of the foreign language is valuable for its cultural insights; this is doubtful, for mediocre literature is more representative of a culture than its more refined counterpart. Teaching sights have to be considerably lowered, lined on a utilitarian target in the hope that the student can be equipped to read professional journals or other material that will be helpful to him in future studies or in his career. The problem is to encourage the learner to read anything at all on his own initiative in the foreign language. (Appended is a questionnaire sheet for the student's record.) (AMM)

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Alun L. W. Rees

English Literature, the Foreign Learner, and the Adapted Text

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English Literature

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a foreigner, in possession of a good knowledge of English, will want to read our literary 'classics.' Indeed, the ability to cope with literary masterpieces in the original is still often quoted as a prime reason for embarking upon the study of foreign languages. The purpose of the present article is to examine this assumption, with specific reference to the novel, by first surveying some of the benefits to be derived from reading the best examples of one's native literature, followed by a consideration of the extent to which these same values can be gained by the foreign reader. The discussion will then be supplemented by a brief look at the place of the 'adapted' text in this context.

A novel is written to be enjoyed: a platitude that cannot be too often expressed. No author ever laboured over his manuscript bearing in mind that the outcome of his endeavours might one day be murderously dissected in the classroom, with small extracts subsequently reappearing in contrived combinations in students' essays. At least part of the enjoyment which results from reading any form of imaginative literature lies in the relaxation derived from undertaking a satisfying activity. There is activity because the reader is called upon to make a certain effort: the story has to be read and understood, involving not only literal comprehension, but the apprehension of wider implications; the memory will be exercised in keeping the overall picture in mind while the theme is gradually developed; imaginative reading and projection will be required to assimilate the mood of the work.

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The reader who is involved in this activity goes through an experience that extends beyond the confines of physical limitations. Irwin Edman[1] brings this out when he writes, referring to the characters in a novel:

> The great and simple appeal of fiction is that it enables us to share imaginatively in the fortunes of these created beings without paying the price of time or defeat for their truimphs and frustrations. One moves with them in lands where one has never been, experiences loves one has never known.

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1 Irwin Edman. Arts and the Man. Mentor Books, New York: 1949, p. 77.

> And this entrance into lives wider and more various than our own in turn enables us more nicely to appreciate and more intensely to live the lives we know.

The author recalls a specific personal instance. On reading Shakespear's 'Much Ado About Nothing' as a 17-year-old schoolboy, he was urged to protest at the final love-match of such a mutually repellant pair as Beatrice and Benedick, which he regarded as merely a politic and unconvincing artifice on the part of the dramatist. Although familiar with the physical attraction of opposite poles, he was not until then aware of a corresponding emotional attraction in human beings.

Of course, the reader need not agree with what he finds, nor share a sense of identity with any of the characters. It is not even essential that he should feel he ever has been or will be involved in similar events. This extension of his experience is meaningful to him through its universality. The novel deals with the experiences of individuals in relation to other individuals and in doing so may transcend geographical or cultural boundaries but remains of broad appeal in dealing with human beings, whether they differ or not.

We therefore have something to learn from a novel as a result of being involved in a new experience; it has moral worth. Yet an explicitly stated moral will rarely be found. Heavy moralizing or outright didacticism would send most modern readers scurrying to some more attractive activity. Novels are not written to communicate any trite message. As Welleck and Warren[2] points out:

> ... a literary work of art is not a simple object but rather a highly complex organization of stratified character with multiple meanings and relationships.

We would be misguided, for example, in claiming that Thackeray wrote Vanity Fair to warn us explicitly of the folly of human vanity. The folly of human vanity we do indeed see, although the author himself offers no moral solution to the problems of the world he creates. The moral worth is subtly revealed through the words, actions and relationships of the characters. The novel is the message.

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[2] René Welleck and Austin Warren. Theory of Literature. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949, p. 17. Quoted by Nelson Brooks. Language and Language Learning. Harcourt, Brace, 1960, p. 101.

In reading, new connections are suggested to us of which we were not aware before. We have to divine their significance ourselves. This heuristic process explains how we can enjoy and learn from a novel which has no express message.

Now the crux of all art lies in the reassembling and combining of material to create a pattern, a feeling of order and stability in the chaotic world of our experience. As Edman[3] states:

> Experience, apart from art and intelligence, is wild and orderless. It is formless matter, aimless movement.

and he later elaborates on this by explaining:

> For fiction is one of the clearest instances of pure creation and throws considerable illumination on what the whole imaginative process is. All experience, from the simplest apperception of an object, is a kind of fiction. We do not see things; we construct them from the random stimulations of impulse and habit. In more than a merely metaphorical sense, chairs and tables, trees and buildings, cabbages and kings, are the busy work of our imagination. The flux of experience provides the data from which we construct the stable objects around us. Our conception indeed, of a world is itself a highly architectural fiction. Still more obviously, though not more emphatically, is our knowledge of other people, even our most intimate friends, a fiction we spin, a loose jointed novel we create from the fragmentary data of our contacts with them, from the scattered rumours and gossip out of which we come to the more or less stable fiction we call an acquaintance or friend.

The author then, has to strive to create an illusion of reality in which different aspects of the formless experience encountered in life as lived by human beings are unified by patterns. This is aptly described by Maupassant[4] in his Preface to 'Pierre et Jean' (1855):

> Life leaves everything on the same scale; it crowds facts together or drags them out indefinitely. Art, on the contrary, consists in using precautions and making preparations, in contriving artful and imperceptible transitions, in bringing the essential events

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[3] Irwin Edman, op.cit., pp. 12 & 76.

[4] Quoted by F. Karl and M. Magalaner. A Reader's Guide to Great 20th Century Novels. New York: The Noonday Press, 1959, p. 6.

> into full light by simple ingenuity of composition, and giving to all others the degree of relief suited to their importance, so as to produce a profound sense of the special truth one wishes to exhibit.

The very fact that a novel has a physical beginning and end, with the chapters divided into paragraphs, the paragraphs into sentences, the sentences into words, the words into a system of black marks which we call letters, all confined within the covers of the book, suggests an order, a basic arrangement. Even within the apparently chaotic 20th century novel we can seek a controlled disorder. The author must therefore be selective; experiences have to be humanized and rationalized, otherwise what would appear on paper would be a list of disembodied, unpatterned chronological events. Although the author may hold a mirror up to life, the reflection is inevitably modified by his own interpretation. So when a fictitious character is dubbed 'real,' this obviously does not give the lie to the possibility of separate existence but merely expresses the subjective opinion that the creation is meaningful and consistent in the special context marshalled by the author.

The novelist then, is responsible for a particular artistic form expressed through the medium of language. His task is well defined by Edman[5]:

> It is one of the chief functions of the artist to render experience arresting by rendering it alive. The artist, be he poet, painter, sculptor, or architect, does something to objects, the poet and novelist do something to events, that compel the eye to stop and find pleasure in the beholding, the ear to hear for the sheer sake of listening, the mind to attend for the keen, impractical pleasure of discovery or suspense or surprise.

This leads us on to a second acknowledged level of literary enjoyment: the aesthetic pleasure derived from analyzing the novel as a work of art. As many an unfortunate schoolboy knows only too well, involved here is a painstaking operation whereby the novel is assiduously taken part in an attempt to lay bare the author's skill. Preoccupation with the plot often looms large, as though it were an entity separate from the characters (we are reminded of E.M. Forster's cryptic remark: "Oh dear, yes; the novel has a plot"). Also involved will be technical consideration of the form, structure and style, the selection, organization and presentation of material and the extent to which the author achieves what we feel he has set out to do. This will include

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[5] Irwin Edman, op.cit., p. 14.

consideration of the beauty, rhythm, range, choice and aptness of diction; handling of dialogue, wit, humour and pathos; clearness of exposition; narrative power; the development of the plot; being logically consistent; the creation and sustaining of characters and their interaction; the depth of the author's insight and imagination; and his sincerity. The study may also be extended to comparison with other works of the author or his contemporaries, or the place of this particular work in the history of literature.

The Foreigner Learner

So far outlined have been two broad values for the native speaker inherent in the reading and study of literature: the simple enjoyment of reading an interesting story, with new pastures opened up for our limited experience; and the intellectual, critical appreciation of a text. This brings us back to the opening statement of this article, parodied[6] to express a common misconception. For one wonders whether or not the ability to handle the higher reaches of literature in the target language is indeed a realistic aim for the foreign learner. Everyday enjoyment is indeed within his grasp, for most people obtain pleasure from a good story well told. But the obvious truth must be acknowledged that most of our students have no literary bent, and would hardly read a 'classic' even in their own language, except for examination purposes.

Language courses at school and university are admittedly geared to the final examination which may allot pride of place to literary analysis. Yet one may doubt whether what is after all essentially a professional activity should ever be foisted on the foreign student of English. Furthermore, we may ask ourselves how many of our students are actually capable of successfully meeting this formidable challenge when they have not thoroughly mastered even the present-day form of the target language, nor yet come to the stage of enjoying reading for its own sake. As Pattison[7] points out:

> Secondary school pupils read Shakespeare and Dickens and jump straight from rather elementary present-day French to Racine.

For the non-native speaker to undertake meaningful and therefore personal appreciation of a literary work assumes excellent reading fluency and critical ability, as well as a very sound command of our cultural heritage to enable him to discern

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[6] First line of 'Pride and Prejudice,' Jane Austen.

[7] Bruce Pattison. The Literary Element in Teacher Education. In: Teachers of English as a Second Language. G. E. Perren, O.U.P., 1968, p. 147.

incidental references, nuances in meaning and overtones of feeling. If we are frank we will admit that, in the narrow academic sense, literary appreciation of an original text is within the reach of relatively few foreign learners of English.

Often, too, it is glibly claimed that the reading of the best examples of the literature of the foreign language is valuable for the cultural insights it brings to the learner. Yet a little thought soon reveals the fallacy of this assertion. As Robert Hall[8] remarks in a forthright article, one can doubt the value of classic literature in this respect, for mediocre literature is more representative of a culture than its more refined counterpart. Indeed, literature is not necessarily the highest expression of a culture, nor the measure of it, and is generally restricted to certain aspects, omitting important ones such as the ethico-religious, the scientific, or the aesthetic. Facts about culture are frequently offered by specific texts, and need not be indirectly gleaned with such effort, and probably in the inaccurate form of a caricature by the untrained reader.

Furthermore, as the bulk of classic novels on the market deal with the 19th century, whatever social background is revealed, though it may well be in keeping with that prevalent in the learner's own coutnry, has little bearing or relevance to the England of today, except from an historical angle. But even here one might be inclined to agree with John Wilson[9] when he reveals that:

> ... to the writer (Wilson), geography seems to be more important than history, and it is the geography of Ergland that is perpetually reflected in its literature, far more than the pattern of events we call the history of a nation.

Our sights have to be considerably lowered. They may be lined on a utilitarian target in the hope that the student can be equipped to read professional journals or other material that will be helpful to him in future studies or in his career. In the more immediate classroom context we may aim at supplementing and consolidating oral work by revising familiar vocabulary or extending its use. From the broader educational viewpoint, however, we realize that our task is to

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[8] Robert A. Hall, Jr. Literature, Life and Language. The Modern Language Journal, vol LV, no. 3, March, 1961

[9] John Burgess Wilson. English Literature (A Survey for Students). Longmans, 1958, p. 13.

prepare the student to work on his own long after he has left our hands - to show him the pleasure of handling foreign words in live contexts. The battle lies not on the distant front of the literary classic, but in encouraging the learner to read anything at all on his own initiative in the foreign language.

As has often been said, the pupil must be obliged to read for pleasure whether he likes it or not! This will not be achieved by enforced, precipitated attacks on the foreign classics. It is not at all clear why the student should be subjected to this daunting work. In essence it embodies a gruelling translation exercise which results, after much frustration, dictionary thumbing and inspired guesswork, in a fourth rate translation in the mother tongue, when in most cases perfectly adequate professional translations are on the market. Even where they are not available, the effect on student motivation and attitude is frequently so disastrous that no reasonable defence can uphold such an amateurish assault upon a literary work. Anyone who has suffered from this kind of teaching (this includes the author) will heartily endorse that nothing is more demoralizing, nothing more stultefying, nothing more dehumanizing than being forcibly engaged for any length of time upon what one suspects to be utterly futile.

The reading habit, then, has to be carefully nurtured. The first essential stage is to ensure that the learner acquires reading fluency, for as Clark Keating[10] points out:

> No one who reads a foregin language at a speed substantially slower than he achieves in reading English is likely to read any foreign material after college.

Thus the learner has to be presented with material well within his linguistic and imaginative grasp, material which he can read comfortably, which has form and human interest. Emphasis will be moved from the language per se; the reading will not at first be regarded primarily as a word mine or as material demanding precise understanding. Only in this way will the learner be gradually instilled with a wider love of reading for its own sake.

This is a realistic objective, for a love of reading often exists naturally in our pupils and only needs fostering. The danger is that it will be stifled by the setting of reading assignments that produce a plodding progression constantly interrupted by dictionary thumbing or glossary reference. Fluent reading is required.

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10 Clark Keating. How to Teach Literature. Modern Language Journal, Vol. XLV, No. 1, January, 1961.

This entails the ability to read a piece as a whole, without too much skipping; to perceive and recognize a minimum of up to three or four words at a glance in the foreign language, thus offsetting recourse to word for word translation.

Together with fluency must come understanding and more and more attentive reading, seeing that the learner may well merely go through the motions with little real comprehension taking place. As mentioned earlier, the enjoyment and relaxation associated with reading derives from mental activity. Later will come encouragement for the learner to think about what he is reading, to make some elementary value judgments as a preliminary to awakening his capacity for fuller appreciation when his command of the language allowed for this.

The Adapted Text

The value of the 'adapted' novel can now be clearly seen. Adapted forms of the literary classics abbreviated and retold within a limited vocabulary, were pioneered by Michael West[11] with the appearance in 1926 of an adapted form of 'Robinson Crusoe' in the New Method Series. They have now earned themselves a well-deserved place on that continuum from the first flash-card to advanced reading in the foreign tongue. There is, however, an ill-founded tendency to look with contempt at the pallid reflection of an original work represented by the simplified text. Nelson Brooks,[12] for example, insists that:

> Because of his limited ability in the language, the learner for some time profits most from pieces of modest dimensions and without special difficulties in structure or vocabulary. This does not mean that literary works chosen for his use should be 'simplified,' a Procrustean act that does unwonted violence to the author's intent and lulls the reader into a false sense of security.

Though no one would deny that any thorough going tampering with an original text obviously devastates the author's style, reducing the work to a mere skeletal

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[11] See: Michael West. Criteria in the Selection of Simplified Reading Books. English Language Teaching, vol. XVIII, No. 4, July, 1964.

[12] Nelson Brooks. Language and Language Learning. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960, p. 101.

outline, there is a sound pedagogical reason why this practice should be welcomed by the foreign language teacher. As West[13] himself states:

> Few things are more encouraging to a child who knows some (say) 1,500 words of English than to pick up a book written within that vocabulary, and find that he is actually able to read and enjoy a story which is (at least) an enthralling approximation to the original.

The false sense of security which Brooks refers to, in fact affords the learner a real feeling of achievement, thereby encouraging him to read more and forming an important stage along the road of reading for pleasure. Of course, it is not claimed that reading a simplified work in the foreign tongue is an end in itself or a substitute for the real thing, yet few of our secondary school pupils reach even this stage, and fewer proceed far beyond. Also it should be remembered that though the style of such readers appears somewhat banal and condescending to the adult native reader for whom these texts were not intended, the foreign learner does not possess the linguistic sophistication in English to be fully aware of the stylistic details, especially when engrossed in comprehending what lies before him.

Here, then, we may allow ends to justify means, for if the pupil is attracted by the magic label of a 'classic' which in the original would be far beyond him, then there should be no compunction in hacking an author's work to pieces in fitting it for a specific need. This is not an irrevocable procedure. For those who regard it as a heinous and wanton act performed upon the sacrosant classic, we might quote J. A. Bright's[14] ironic rejoinder to a group of querulous trainee teachers:

> We admitted, indeed we took pains to expose the "inferiority" of the simplified classics to the originals, and we begged the students to write literary masterpieces at the appropriate level.

In use, the adapted text serves for extensive, supplementary reading rather than the intensive study more appropriate to a set text. Thus teacher and learner may conveniently sidestep the practice of talking about the novel rather than

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13 Michael West. Learning to Read a Foreign Language and Other Essays on Language Teaching. London: Longmans, 1940, p. 69.

14 J. A. Bright. The Training of Teachers of English as a Second Language in Africa. In: Teachers of English as a Second Language, op. cit., p. 37.

experiencing it - a fate that all too often befalls work with a set text. There will be no call for the student to gloss the text to ensure that he understands every word and turn of the phrase. On the contrary, he will be encouraged to move swiftly through the reading much as a native speaker would, gleaning most words from the context without pausing at every unfamiliar lexical item. He will be advised to look up only those new words which prove a real stumbling block to understanding, or which recur frequently in the reading. Too much dictionary thumbing will signify that the text is above the learner's level, and should be replaced by one with a more restricted vocabulary. Neither will there be the opportunity for mawkishly sentimental appreciation. Sincere enjoyment is the priority if the learner is to be led to a wider love of reading.

Some oral or written guidance may be offered before the reader embarks on the novel, but on the whole this preamble is best omitted, for it blunts the element of expectation that normally carries him through to the end. A novel is a self-contained unit that induces its own understanding. We migh do well here to repeat Robin Mayhead's[15] plea concerning the full novel:

> To the teacher one must say, in an imploring tone, give only such explanatory information as is <u>absolutely necessary</u> ... never treat it in such a way as to make the student feels that it is distinct from the world he knows.

For a group of some 20 students, 4 or 5 supplementary adapted texts will prove quite sufficient if they are circulated. The teacher's choice of title will depend upon what is available, so that he will probably find himself limited to the 19th century novel, as there seems to be a feeling that all the best authors are dead.[16] If the class is of homogenous ability, then each text may be of the same word level, otherwise a selection of stages will obviously have to be acquired.

There remains the question of checking on this reading, because the mere distribution of texts will not guarantee that they are being properly read, or even read at all. One way of achieving this is by means of a standardized questionnaire which the learners fill in when returning the borrowed book. The danger with such a question-sheet, however is that it may reduce reading to the level of yet another

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15 Robin Mayhead. Understanding Literature. Cambridge University Press, 1965.

16 See: Antony Pearson. Reflexions on the Use of Simplified Texts E.L.T., Vol. XXII, No. 3, May 1968.

class chore. So care must be taken to render it as brief and general as possible, as in the example on the next page where there are sufficient entries for the teacher to detect student cribbing, though it should take no more than ten minutes to complete.

This very practical questionnaire offers several distinct advantages: it saves the teacher valuable time that would otherwise be consumed in personal interviews with each student; it serves for record purposes; attention can be focussed on the story without reference to extraneous material; it helps to foster attentive reading, the ability to detect a central theme, and inference from context; the pupil is encouraged to think about the novel as a whole after reading; the teacher will be shown if this particular text is within the learner's capability and interest; above all, the learner will be motivated by knowledge that the teacher is interested in his comments, and also by the feeling, after answering the questions, that he has mastered a reading piece in the foreign tongue. In this way the first requisites of fluent reading and understanding will gradually be established.

To summarize this general survey, with its emphasis on the novel: two broad aspects are commonly cited as values to be derived from reading the best examples of the literature of one's native tongue: the active enjoyment of following a story, together with the extension of experience it offers; and, at more advanced levels, aesthetic appreciation involved in considering the novel as a work of art.

An an aim in both second and native language teaching, the former is frequently allowed priority, the latter being left to take care of itself. So, long before he has gained reading fluency, the foreign learner is launched upon advanced literary criticism which engrosses him in the inadequate translation of original works whose language and content have little bearing on what is within his interest and ability, thus disregarding his real needs. This is a fruitless practice. The majority of learners never reach the very advanced level necessary for true and sincere appreciation of a foreign classic. In any case, it represents a very indirect and limited way of gaining access to the foreign culture by the insights that are often stressed as a motive for forcing the learner to run before he can walk.

Our aim needs to be much more modest. The desire to read in English cannot be assumed in our pupils; it has to be deliverately fostered. If they can be persuaded to read anything at all in the foreign tongue after their formal training is over, let alone the higher reaches of literature, then we may pride ourselves on having instilled something of lasting value.

Supplemntary Reading: Record Sheet

Title:_____ Author_____

No. of Pages:_____ Publisher:_____ First Published:_____

Surname(s):_____Chr. Name(s):_____

Year of Study:_____ Date Borrowed:_____ Returned:_____

1. How did you find the reading?

( ) a. too easy
( ) b. a little too easy
( ) c. just right
( ) d. a little difficult
( ) e. difficult

2. How did you find the story?

( ) a. boring
( ) b. fairly interesting
( ) c. interesting
( ) d. very interesting
( ) e. extremely interesting

3. Give up to 4 new words or expressions you have learnt in English.

a._____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____

4. Name, if possible, any <u>one</u> character that you ....

a. liked:_____
b. disliked:_____
c. felt indifferent to:_____
_____

5. Write briefly what you consider to have been the main theme:

_____
_____

6. Name the principal places where the action of the story took place:

_____

7. If there are pictures in the book or on the cover, choose one and describe what it illustrates:

_____
_____
_____

8. Describe any point in the story which you consider to have been any <u>one</u> of the following: amusing, sad, frightening, unconvincing, confusing:

_____
_____
_____

Student's Singature:_____ Teacher's Signature:_____

Any further comments you wish to make may be written overleaf.

As an elementary step, the learner has to be nurtured to fluent reading of material well within his linguistic and imaginative capability. Only later will he be gradually led to reading for pleasure in the target language on his own initiative, and ultimately to pay more critical attention to what he reads.

The graded reader, particularly the adpated 'classic' with its wide appeal has an important role to play in this scheme. A few copies, circulated among members of the class for extensive reading at home, will serve to show that reading is a private event that the learner may enjoy without interference from the teacher. However, as a check to ensure that this reading is not being casually skimmed through, each student may be required to fill in a standardized record sheet on completing the text he has borrowed. In the early stages great care will be taken to ensure that this control does not discourage the learner by being too demanding, though it will still offer several ancillary advantages.

Note:

For some relevant articles not referred to in the text, see the following in English Language Teaching:

G. Broughton. Don't Shoot the Editor. Vol. XVI, No. 4. July - September, 1962.
A.V.P. Elliot. The Reading Lesson. Vol. XVII, No. ., October, 1962.
Bruce Pattison. The Literature Lesson. Vol. XVIII, No. 1. October, 1963.
Geoffrey Barnard. On Supplementary Readers. Vol. XXII, No. 1, Octoboer, 1967.